the obscene caress, but Sunderson hid her face with a sob against Clement's ready shoulder, and Nadia and T'serek's men looked anywhere but at what was happening. Spock alone, knowing worse might come, silently ordering the boy to endure it, did not look away. Perhaps it was that or T'serek's frozen stillness under his hands that told the Romulan he would not get his answer that way.

"No? A shame. I prefer to combine business with pleasure. I need to know your ship's itinerary and I will know it. If I have to kill your people one by one before you."

A life and death game, then for unknown stakes. Factors political, moral and expedient aligned themselves in Spock's mind. He could not, in fact, risk human lives for nothing. Nor ignore a threat to his ship. Here, in a crossfire, under threat of instant death to his companions and the Ixmahx leader, none of them could act. But given a delay, the redirection of threat, division of the Romulan force and some favorable opportunity might occur.

"When they were dead you would still have to deal with me." It was said with all the cold detachment of Vulcan discipline, but the inspiration came from one human addicted to bluff and the changing of no-win situations. He did not delude himself that there would be no price to pay.

"And I do have to deal with you. It's a shame in a way. I could respect your achievements." He released T'serek and spoke to his guards.

The Romulans moved in and removed their communicators, along with a surprising number of concealed weapons from the security men. Nadia took their mauling without complaint, but Sunderson's face crumpled as she fought tears, and Clement got himself a split lip for cursing the Romulan who touched her. The commander crossed again to his chair, nursing his wine, staring at Spock. The Vulcan had the rare ability to stand without figiting. He did it now, all his interest in delay, in gaining any information he could. Training and experience proved that the exchange of information between captor and captive was often two-way. In his present situation he himself could hope to gain nothing but information. He reminded himself that facts were always valuable.

The Romulan poured himself more wine. "My name is S'Tyge, Spock. My clan name is Hreth Malok. Do you know the significance of that name?"

He did know. It was the clan of the Romulan commander from whom they had stolen the cloaking device.

"I see that you do. Revenge is an obligation. The commander was my cousin, and until you shamed her, I took great pride in her accomplishments. Take off your clothes."

When Spock made no move to obey, S'Tyge only smiled. "Whatever you hoped to accomplish by splitting my force or yours can be negated very simply by having my guards bring your people back here. And then they will see what I am going to do to you. Take off your clothes."

Slowly Spock obeyed, removing one garment after another until he stood naked in the center of the crystal room. S'Tyge sipped his wine and watched.

"Good. I do not delude myself that simple pain will persuade you to speak. But pain does speak even to Vulcans, and it speaks very loudly to humans. As do other actions. What I am going to do to you I can do again and again, to you and your friends. Bend over the table and let my men bind you."

The crystal furniture was cool to the touch and unyielding as diamond. They bound him with thin flexible metallic cable, drawing his arms and legs widely apart. He could not see what was happening behind him The cable, doubled into sinuous loops, made very adequate whips. They beat him--deep bruising blows with Romulan strength behind them, blows that crushed him against the cool crystal of the table and taxed his powers of concentration. As they were intended to do. The beating stopped before he became unconscious. He heard the guards step back and the whisper of footsteps on the living carpet.

"I have not seriously damaged you, Spock. These wounds--" S'Tyge's touch was gentle as it traced the pattern of bloody welts, "--will heal. You still have time to tell me." The caressing hand moved lower, stroked each striped buttock in turn. "When will your ship return?" The hand slipped to his inner thigh, poised over a ganglia of sensory nerves, fingers tensed over the tender skin.

And there was no point in answering, even if he had know why it was important, even if it was not important at all. A rational being knew the value of a barbarian's word. It should not have seemed so difficult to remain silent.

The hand gripped with silent, deadly strength, finding the nerves, deliberately grinding them against bone, sending waves of shocking, nauseating anguish through his abused body until he finally could not control his response and he tried to pull away.

"Better," S'Tyge said, releasing the pressure. "I want to know that you are paying attention." He moved forward, and his hand was not so gentle on the welts now. His fingers locked in Spock's hair and he lifted his head from the table. "My cousin offered you honorable alliance, Spock--and you returned treachery. Romulans have many vices, Vulcan. We take what we want. But we do not excuse personal betrayal on the basis of military duty."

There was no answer. He had never taken pride in it. It was not the issue now.

"I am going to show you vice, Vulcan, that doesn't dress itself as duty." With his free hand he snapped a capsule under Spock's nose. A puff of bitter yellow smoke drifted against Spock's face, choking him so that he coughed and inhaled. The effect was instantaneous. Every mark on his body seemed redrawn in fire. S'Tyge broke a second capsule and inhaled deeply. His hand went to his crotch while he still held Spock's head up off the table. "Romulan vice--" his voice was a little less steady as he opened his pants, "this one--heightens sensation--without hastening--" He gasped and drew his penis from the cloth. Under the influence of the drug, Spock's throat and nasal passages were coated with the strong scent of the Romulan's arousal. The organ stiffened and swelled as S'Tyge stroked it, the head and great vein dark with blood.

"I wonder if Vulcans are like humans, Spock. They always beg me not to do it."

He did not beg. The eternity of suspense while S'Tyge stood behind him was seconds gained for the others, was a chance for fortune to favor them again. At his command Dray T'serek had endured